Suicide or Martyrdom?

From Shaykh Anwar's Blog on January-22-2009

In the argument of whether operations where the person brings death upon himself are allowed or not, the ones who oppose this form of Jihad use the main argument that it is suicide because death was not brought by the enemy but by the person himself.

Ibn al Athir, in al-Kamel, mentions an incident that happened during the siege of Acre by Salahudeen. Unfortunately, he mentions it in passing without a comment.

He mentions that Salahudeen needed men so he asked for a ship to transport some of his soldiers from Beirut. This was a large ship carrying 700 soldiers full with equipment and provisions. King Richard of England succeeded in intercepting the ship and it was the decree of Allah that the wind stops and the Muslims were surrounded with a fleet of forty sails. Nevertheless the Muslims defended themselves against this overwhelming force. They succeeded in killing many of Richard’s men but the attack of the enemy was fierce. When the Muslim leader saw that the enemy was overcoming them he said we will not die but honorable and we will not hand over to them anything. He did not want them to take them as prisoners and did not want their equipment to fall into the enemies’ hands. So he descended to the bottom of the ship and broke a hole into it and they all drowned. The entire Muslim force of 700 men strong drowned in the sea.
According to the view held by the ones against martyrdom operations this operation is clearly suicide because not only did the Muslims kill themselves with their own hands but they did not inflict any harm on the enemy in doing so. All what was achieved by the Muslims was to avoid capture and prevent the enemy from making use of their equipment. I would also need to note here that death was far from certain if they fell into the hands of Richard because as the events of the time clearly show that many times Muslim prisoners, especially soldiers, were kept alive by the Crusaders for the sake of ransom and labor.

Ibn Shaddad, a Shafi jurist, in al-Nawader al-Sultaniyya also mentions this incident. But he closes with the following: “People were very depressed and the Sultan received the news and considered it to be counted as an act in the path of Allah and he was being patient with the tests of Allah and Allah does not waste the efforts of the good doers.”

This closing comment from Ibn Shaddad reflects his view on what Yaqub, the head of the Muslim force, has done. He says about him: “He was a good man, courageous, and an expert in warfare.” As I quoted above he says: Allah does not waste the efforts of the good doers. This is exactly what the scholars who approve of martyrdom operations say. If the intentions of the Muslim are good and for the sake of Allah then he is a shaheed whether he died by the enemy or by his own hands. It is the intention that counts.

Suicide is one of the kaba’ir (great sins) so is it possible that such a large number of Muslims would commit suicide and be destined to Hellfire and then Ibn al Athir passes over this incident without a note of disapproval? Salahudeen counted the casualties as martyrs in the path of Allah. You may say he was not a scholar. True, but he was the Sultan of Muslims who understood the reality of war, acted responsibly, and was a man that according to his biographers was greatly influenced by al Qadi al Fadhil, a great scholar of his time, and he would not take any decisions without consulting him.

The action of the Muslim leader, Yaqub, was done with the knowledge of his soldiers. In fact, in the narration of Ibn Shaddad it states that they all participated collectively in breaking apart the ship. Is it possible for seven hundred soldiers in the army of the righteous leader Salahudeen al Ayubi to commit such a mass suicide and no one as far as we know disapproves of it? At least Ibn al Athir or Ibn Shaddaad would have asked Allah to forgive them for the sin they committed or something to that effect. Instead Ibn Shaddad a scholar steeped in knowledge praises this amir and says about him and his soldiers “and Allah does not waste the efforts of the good doers.”

The approval of Salahudeen and Ibn Shaddad, and the action of 700 Muslim soldiers are not a source of legislation in Islam so we cannot claim that this is an evidence for the legality of martyrdom operations. The evidence for that needs to be derived from Quran and Sunnah and the understanding of the early generations of the text and I have covered this matter in the series of Mashari al -Ashwaaq. But the above mentioned incident is a reflection of how Muslims in the time

of Salahudeen, a time of victory for the ummah, felt.

Also in general by reading into the words of Ibn Shaddad, Ibn al-Athir, al Qadi al Fadhil, al Imad al Kattib, and the other giants of the time one would see a spirit of strength, sacrifice, hatred of the enemies of Allah and love of the servants of Allah. One would find these scholars rallying behind their leaders of Jihad and standing with the ummah against the enemy in their fatwa and speeches. The ummah were in love with their leaders because they were soldiers in the path of Allah and they loved their scholars because they who spoke the truth.

Scholars of those times even if they disagreed on some issues they would not speak out loud against the Muslim fighters of the day and would not give fatawa that would play into the hands of the enemy. The reputation of the Turkish soldiers who were the Muslim armies of the day was that of corruption and consumption of alcohol. Nevertheless al-Imam al Ghazali said these are the protectors of Islam and had plenty of praise for them. Ibn Taymiyyah in his own words said many of soldiers of his time (the Mamluks) were corrupt but he went as far as calling them al Ta’ifah al Mansoorah.

Today the world turns upside down when one Muslim performs a martyrdom operation. Can you imagine what would happen if that is done by seven hundred Muslims on the same day?!

Brothers and sisters whether you agree or not with martyrdom operations let’s leave our differences behind us, and let us support our Muslim brothers who are in the frontlines. Just like we disagree on many other issues, we should not let our disagreements stand in the way of our solidarity in the face of our adversaries.